

Learning Languages, Language Learning: Reflections on an Anniversary

Carol Ann Dahlberg

At about the same time that I was invited to write this article, I was seated at a dinner with a colleague, a language teacher I had just met. She commented on the third edition of *Languages and Children*, the textbook we would be working with together over the coming ten days. "Whatever happened to Pesola?" she asked, "She was an author for the first two editions, but you are listed this time—Dahlberg." I explained to her that Pesola and Dahlberg are the same person, that only the name had changed. Yet that conversation left me wondering: what else has changed in these past ten years? What really happened to Pesola? And what has this decade meant to our profession, as well?

The name change that my dinner partner noticed reflected a new identity for me. It represented a new marriage, a new status as grandmother and a new living situation. It was a very happy change. In 1995, *Learning Languages* was also a name change that reflected a new status. Instead of a relatively informal newsletter, *FLES News*, our new journal became a place for scholars to share their findings, as well as for teachers to share experiences. The status of "journal" created a new space for serious exchanges about early language learning. This, too, is a very happy change.

Learning Languages celebrates ten years of publication with this issue. A ten-year anniversary is one of those significant milestones that provide occasion for celebration, for looking back and for reflection. As I look back at our profession over the past decade, I am amazed at the remarkable changes that have taken place in such a short period of time. How much we have done together, how much has changed, how much has remained the same—how many challenges remain! These are some of the changes that hold special significance for me.

Standards for Foreign Language Learning

In the first issue of *Learning Languages* in Fall 1995, there was only one mention of Standards—an announcement of a report available from an International Conference on Standards and Assessment, held the preceding summer at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. That fall was the real beginning of the impact of Standards for Foreign

Language Learning in the 21st Century (1996), the final version of which was presented at ACTFL that November. Shortly afterward, Eileen Lorenz, the newly-elected NELL president, announced Standards, political action and teacher-based research as the major goals for the year.

As I have often commented to other teachers, the Standards represent for me the single most important development in language teaching in my professional lifetime. It is especially significant for the NELL family that they created a bold vision, both within and beyond the profession, of a long sequence of language instruction for all learners, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through grade twelve and beyond. Together we are challenged by new ways of thinking about communication—interpersonal, interpretive, presentational—and stronger linkages to the community and to the general curriculum in the Communities and Connections goals. We are finding ways to strengthen the role of Culture in all of our teaching, and we are trying to help our students develop the concepts of culture and of language through the Comparisons goal. I know that my understanding of language teaching has been deepened and broadened by the Standards.

The ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners (1998) have given further guidance and support for teachers, as they outline expectations for student performance at three levels in a Standards-based teaching and learning environment. Together the Standards and the Performance Guidelines give us meaningful and practical resources for planning curriculum and evaluating student progress. Many states and school districts have used these resources as models for local documents. When we add to these guidelines the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Integrated Performance Assessment (2003) a Standards-based model for designing assessments that mirror and guide instruction, we have the most complete and integrated guidance ever available for language teaching and learning.

I believe that we have now come closer to agreement about what is important and what is realistic in language education than at any time in our history. By 2005, every K-12 language textbook series claims consistency with the Standards and includes references to the Standards throughout the teacher materials. Catalogs of supplementary materials also indicate the goals and the standards that their materials are designed to address. Developers of curriculum and materials cannot afford to ignore the Standards, the Performance Guidelines, or the incorporation of performance assessments.



All of this has happened in just ten years.

Technology

Technology has changed our assumptions and our practice in very dramatic ways over the past decade. I remember that ten years ago many of our colleagues in summer workshops were uncomfortable with e-mail or had to learn to use it. Now virtually every teacher has an e-mail address, and some have two or more. When Helena Curtain and I wrote the manuscript for the first and second editions of *Languages and Children*, we had to meet to exchange our work, or send things in the U.S. mail, usually on a floppy disk. For the third edition, published in 2004, we exchanged our work almost instantly via e-mail attachments. I will submit this article to the editor in the same way.

In 1995, I couldn't teach or make any kind of presentation without using stacks of transparencies for the overhead projector. In 2005, I can't make a presentation without using PowerPoint® and a digital projector. My stacks of transparencies are safely filed away. I now can find research, images, information, news in another language and almost anything else on the internet—I regularly purchase books and even electronics on the Web. Ten years ago such riches and opportunities were unthinkable.

Technology has influenced our connections to professional resources and colleagues in other ways as well. We can access the website for the ACTFL, or NNELL or any other professional organization that interests us, and there we can register for conferences, access resources and even locate contact information for colleagues. Many of us have web pages or web logs (blogs) for ourselves or for our schools, where we can share ideas, resources, pictures and even information for and by our students. NNELL's website (www.nnell.org) contains a wealth of information and resources. We also communicate using listservs, such as Ñandú and FL-Teach, where teachers can share ideas, ask and answer questions, offer encouragement and advice and alert one another to opportunities and resources. Even the most isolated early language teacher no longer needs to feel alone!

Marc Prensky (2001) has pointed out that in the world of technology, our students are the natives and we are the immigrants. As we test the possibilities of what we are now learning to do, with our students often leading the way, I can't even imagine what the next ten years will make possible for all of us.

Advocacy

Advocacy is one aspect of our shared profession that in some ways has changed very little over the past ten years. Early language teachers and parents have always needed to be advocates for their programs. Although the challenge may be ongoing, the context has changed a good deal. Ten years ago we were energized by the Standards vision of a K-12 language sequence, and the brain research popularized in 1996 and 1997 underscored the value and appropriateness of early language learning. We focused this energy on establishing new programs, supported both by research and by national priorities. Advocacy at that time meant gaining public support for ever-expanding language opportunities.

By the end of the decade, however, an era of budget cutting and realignment of resources has largely halted the surge of program growth at the elementary school level. The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, although it nominally includes languages among basic subjects, has caused many school districts to cut back or cut out early language programs in favor of increased time for reading and mathematics. Advocacy has become an essential part of the job for all early language teachers, simply to keep their programs alive and intact. In a feature article in *Learning Languages* 9(2) (Spring 2004), Marcia Rosenbusch and Laurie Sorensen identify "Threats and Strategies to Counter Threats," a series of stories dramatizing the importance of advocacy in our current educational climate.

2005: The Year of Languages has been a major national effort to raise public awareness about the importance of language learning. This campaign, the first of its kind in our profession, invites strong participation from all of us. Its focus for October 2005 is Early Language Learning.

Methodology

Creative teachers continue to devise, refine and adapt strategies for language teaching. Elementary school language teachers need to be especially creative, since appropriate materials for K-5 are still in short supply. In the Connections goal area of the national standards, these elementary school teachers definitely have led the way. Ten years ago the integration of language and content from the curriculum was already firmly in place at the K-5 level, and by 2005 this integration has become well-established at all grade levels and into the college and university.

I like and admire the dynamism of the people in our profession, who take good ideas from every source and make them their own. In 1995, for example, TPR (Total Physical Response), a method developed by James Asher, was a popular strategy with dedicated and enthusiastic practitioners who discovered that they could use TPR keep their students active, engaged and using the target language. The Natural Approach (1983), developed by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell, was based on many of the same ideas and influenced both language teachers and textbook writers.

In 2005 there is great excitement about TPRS (Total Physical Response Storytelling, or, more recently, Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling), a strategy developed by Blaine Ray. Ideas and success stories are exchanged on Ñandú, FLTeach and special listservs just for TPRS enthusiasts, in much the same way that TPR was energizing us ten years before. As with TPR and other good ideas, each practitioner contributes her or his own embellishments and experiences, and the potential of the strategy continues to grow.

Sometimes the surging popularity of a strategy is discounted as "just another bandwagon," but I have long been a believer in bandwagons. I have learned a lot from climbing on them and giving them a test drive. They often challenge our assumptions and jiggle our paradigms; the creativity and enthusiasm generated by a bandwagon can encourage us to try something new, and perhaps to uncover new dimensions for our teaching. While there are surely dangers if we believe we have found the ultimate method or strategy, the insights gained from each new "bandwagon" can enrich our repertoire and help us to provide more effective (maybe even magical!) learning environments for our students. TPR was such a bandwagon for me, and I expect to experience similar challenges and stimulation from TPRS, as well as from other energizing approaches as they appear over the next ten years.

The Challenges Continue

This short list of changes over the past decade is certainly incomplete, and any such list would be outdated even before it could be printed. I might cite the movement in many states toward K-12 licensure for foreign language teachers, often without adding to the curriculum or providing substantive preparation and background in early language learning. I might have included backward design, or curriculum mapping, or performance assessment, or SOPA, SOPI, and ELLOPA tests of oral language proficiency. I might have mentioned the growth of two-way immersion programs, or the developing interest in Chinese and Arabic, or multiple intelligences and brain research. All of these present both challenges and opportunities for our profession, and for each of us individually.

Throughout my professional career I have felt a special

affection for and a close bond with early language teachers. Our community has been remarkably supportive of one another, generous with ideas and unselfish in leadership and service. Over the past ten years, and dating back to the 1987 beginning of NNELL, we have developed an organization that can guide our joint efforts toward the shared vision expressed on the editorial page of *Learning Languages* 1:1 and every issue since: NNELL's "commitment to promoting opportunities for all children to develop a high level of competence in at least one language and culture in addition to their own."

Realizing this vision, in the face of the challenges and opportunities of the next ten years, will require the best efforts of every one of us. Let us pause to celebrate where we have been and where we are now. And then let us keep working together to build a multilingual, multicultural future for our children!

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